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## Writer's Notebook: A Place to Dream, Wonder, and Explore

### Between the Ideal and the Real World of Teaching

Ideas for the Classroom from the NCTE Elementary Section  
Joanne Hindley Salch and Marianne Marino, Coeditors  
Ralph Fletcher, Guest Editor

# The Writer's Notebook

by Ralph Fletcher, author and educational consultant, *Lee, New Hampshire*



I always tell kids that the most important book I've written is one that will never be published: my writer's notebook. As the TV commercial used to say, I don't leave home without it! But the notebook has relevance for students, too. In this issue we look at practical ways you can bring this exciting idea to young writers. The writer's notebook provides conditions that are necessary for students to grow into strong writers.

### A Place to Live the Writing Life

When we teach the language arts, we aren't satisfied with reading and writing as mere frills or adornments. We want reading and writing to become an integral part of our kids' lives. It's great when our kids read during reading time, but it's not enough. We want them to be reading all the time.

The same thing is true for writing. It's not enough for kids to be writing once a day. We want them to see themselves as writers. The writer's notebook can make this happen. A student who keeps a notebook can begin to live like a writer—noticing, paying attention, listening, collecting, musing, wondering, playing with language, taking

pleasure in her own words. And because the notebook is portable, it encourages kids to write not just during the workshop but at all hours of the day.

### A Place to React

"Writers react," Don Murray says in his article "The Writer's Habits." This is important. Many of our students adopt a passive stance toward their learning. No wonder they do—curriculum often feels like a one-way conversation to these students. The writer's notebook nudges students to become more active learners. It gives them a place to react to their world, to make that all-important personal connection. And the notebook provides a safe place—no grades, no one correcting their grammar.

### A Place to Experiment

Our writers need to write for a specific purpose. But they will also grow by fooling around with ideas, words, images, phrases. I believe that this kind of language play is crucial. Unfortunately, it is being squeezed out of the school day by high-stakes tests and curriculum mandates. As writing-for-the-fun-of-it becomes an

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## Using the

# Writer's Notebook

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endangered species, the writer's notebook becomes that much more valuable.

The writer's notebook gives kids a place where they can enjoy language for its own sake. One student began a list of favorite words in his notebook—*hanky panky, gobbledygook, nincompoop*. Another child discovered that no word exists for the space between thumb and forefinger, so she invented a new word! She found this to be so much fun that she created a list in her notebook of other words she invented.

My notebook has an Adrienne Rich poem about a swan; the piece is shaped like a swan and its reflection in the water. The idea of the poem, and its execution, is breathtaking. It inspires me.

The writer's notebook is not a new idea. Writers have been scribbling notes and sketching in daybooks for hundreds of years. And it's important to remember that the writer's notebook is nothing more than blank pages bound together. But with your guidance, and through your own example, these blank pages have enormous potential to spark young writers. Listen to this poem by John Mihaltses, a fifth grader from Long Island, New York.

### It's a Place

Why am I keeping this notebook?

Because it's a place where I can keep track of my life.

It's a place where I can observe closely

And where I can store little pieces of strength.

It's a place where I can keep the elements of Life

(lightning, fire, ice, time and space) and Writing

(poetry, words, eyes).

It's a place where tales weave.

All in all

It's a place for ME.



*by Lynn Herschlein, Locust Valley Central School District, New York*

On the first day of school in September, my students are excited and a little unsure about how they will use their notebooks. They want to know if I will tell them what to write, if their writing will be graded, and “does spelling count?” I explain that they are in control of what goes into their notebooks and that only published writing will be graded. Spelling is important, but shouldn't keep them from writing freely and using hard-to-spell words. I explain that they will learn ways to edit their work so that readers will be able to read it with ease, and that when writing “comes out of the notebook” it will need to be carefully polished. They happily decorate their notebook covers and listen as I talk to them about collecting ideas, researching questions, and capturing moments.

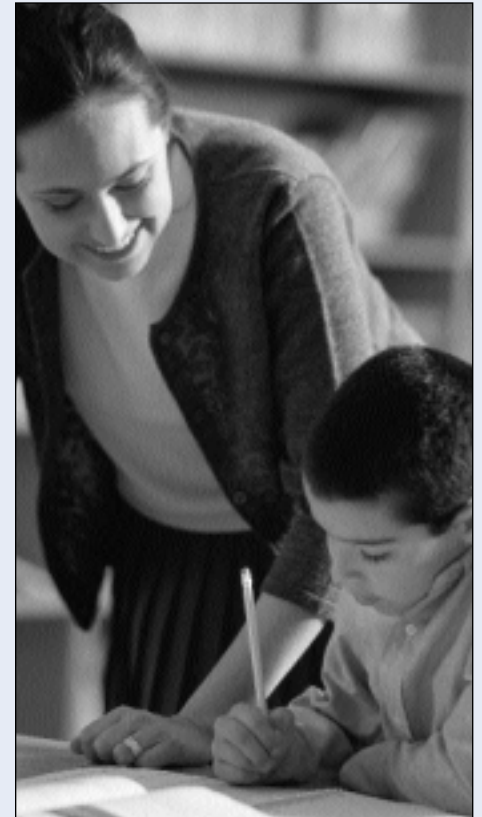
I see excitement in some eyes, skepticism in others, and I realize that for notebooks to take hold in my classroom, I've got to be committed to them. I've got to get kids thinking, wondering, observing, and caring deeply about expressing their ideas. And I've got to dedicate the precious time it takes to let them do it.

When kids begin writing, I move among them, listening as they read entries to me, asking questions, naming techniques they may have used, and noticing entries that can serve as models for others. Most students are happy to allow me to make overheads of their entries to share with classmates. In this way, my students enrich each other's notebook writing.

There are many ways to promote variety and foster creativity in the writer's notebook. Try having students write after sketching, bringing in an important object from their own lives, or taping a photograph, picture, quote or article into their notebooks. Teach them to create lists, conduct interviews, and observe closely.

If some of my students are dealing with writer's block and need help gathering ideas, I might conduct an activity using prompts like “My favorite per-

son...,” “I've always wondered...,” or “It's not fair that...” and record them on index cards. We sit in a big circle, with everyone holding a card. Each person looks at his or her own card, and everybody writes in the notebooks, quickly and freely, for a few minutes. Then we



pass the cards and repeat the process. These quick-writes are fun and provide students with “seed ideas” to return to at other times.

Eventually, my students are given a homework assignment. They read carefully through their notebooks, looking for an entry that feels important or interesting enough to become their first writing project. Next, I begin to teach them strategies to help them stretch or extend their writing and thinking. One such strategy is called “lifting a line.” The writer selects a line from the chosen entry and writes it at the top of a clean

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# Using Writer's Notebooks in the Classroom

by Bev Gallagher, Princeton Day School, Princeton, New Jersey

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page. The line serves as a starting point from which the writing begins.

John chose this line from his entry about his new baby brother: "In the middle of the night he always cries." In the original entry the writing that followed was, by John's own admission, "kinda boring." For five days, John tried the "lift a line" strategy. The following are excerpts from his notebook:

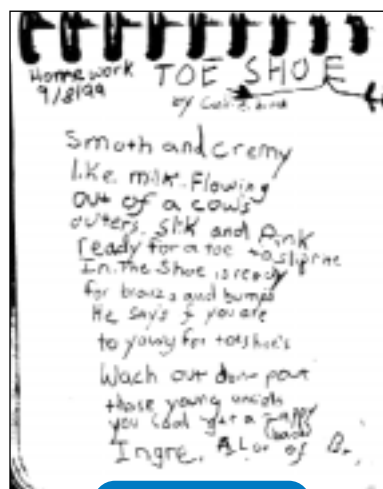
My brother cries a lot, but I have a way to stop it. I take two fingers and rub them against his forehead.

When I rub his forehead with the back of my two fingers, he stops crying. He stops complaining and smiles at me. He closes his eyes and falls asleep. His chest goes up and down when he breathes.

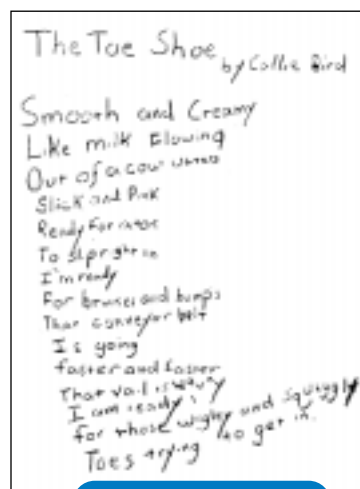
I have to feed him. . . When I'm finally done, I feel like he is trying to say "Thank you, John." (But not yet. He's too young to talk.)

Had this been an assignment to be completed in a day or two, the rich detail, precious observations, and understated love would have remained unwritten. Instead, John will spend time selecting the best lines and parts from his collection of entries, slowing down the action in places where he knows there's more to say, adding sensory details to enhance his readers' imagery, and evoking emotion through dialogue and gestures—all craft lessons he has learned from his favorite authors (both published and fellow nine-year-olds).

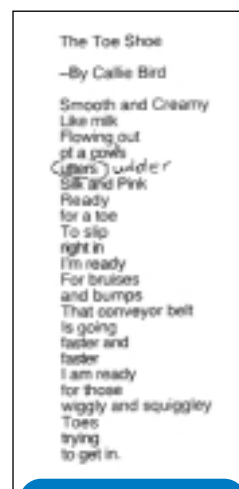
The writer's notebook has the power to teach writers by letting them write. Given time and good models, young writers will fill the pages of their notebooks with poetry, stories, and facts. They will ask thoughtful questions, conduct research, record their thinking, and ask new questions. They will write and rewrite their leads and their endings. They will seek new words to express their ideas, and new ways to describe what they see and feel. ▼



Word work



Moving to paper



Revising/editing

As I look around my third-grade classroom, I think about the extraordinary writing that happens here. I know that I can trace its origins to those little 3" x 3" unlined notebooks that I placed on the students' desks in the beginning of the year.

These writers' notebooks become the students' containers for jotting down words, ideas, quotes, and so on. These beginnings become the fodder for longer pieces of writing that matter to the students, writing that is powerful to them.

So, how to get started with these notebooks? The first few days of school I model with my own notebook, showing students my pages covered with words, quotes, drawings, and lists. I keep it close by for easy jotting. I also surround my students with wonderful literature—poetry, memoir, and nonfiction. As we do our read-alouds, students might pull out their notebooks to write down a line they love, an idea that's been triggered, a snip of conversation, or just about anything. Giving students a place to record words or ideas that are powerful to them preserves the thoughts for later development in writing that will take place in the classroom.

Four large signs hang prominently in our room:

- Word work
- Moving to paper
- Revising/editing
- Final form

These are the stages that we move through as we are working on our writing. Students begin with word work, right in their writer's notebooks. At this stage they may be going back through their notebooks and placing sticky notes on pages that have ideas or words that they would like to investigate further. Alternatively, they may use a fresh page for gathering ideas around a new topic. Perhaps they have just heard Georgia Heard's poem "Compass" in *School Supplies* and have an idea of their own that they would like to explore, an ordinary idea that becomes extraordinary.

That's exactly what happened to Callie. She decided that she would like to gather ideas and words about her ballet shoe. Callie, an avid dancer, found this to be very exciting. She took her notebook home that evening, jotting down her thoughts as she carefully examined her shoe.

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The Toe Shoe  
By Callie Bird

Smooth and creamy  
like milk  
flowing out of a cow's udder  
silk and pink  
ready for a toe to slip right in  
I'm ready for bruises  
and bumps  
That conveyor belt  
is going  
faster and faster  
I am ready  
for those  
wiggly and squiggly  
toes  
to get in.

Final form

Once she felt that she had enough thoughts captured, she was ready for stage 2—moving to paper. Here, she filled in lines, played with line breaks, and watched her poem evolve. Stage 3, revising and editing, prompted her to read her poem aloud, listening for punctuation, word economy, and other changes that might take place.

Students know to mark their work with a green editing pencil to signify the changes they are contemplating. Finally, those early kernels from their notebook are ready to find their way to stage 4—final form. Will they choose to type it, opt for fancy stationery, or use a special pen to produce their best writing?

Students carefully consider all these choices as they select the perfect platform for their final piece. Their pride is evident as they share their finished work with their peers. The writer's notebooks are the soil on which students can capture the seeds of an idea, cultivate them into seedlings, and finally, bring them into full bloom! ▼

# the Pump

## Priming

by JoAnn Portalupi, author and educational consultant, Lee, New Hampshire

One of the best ways to encourage writing and develop fluency is to invite students to write regularly in a writer's notebook. Here are a few ways to get yourself and your students started. Try to set aside thirty minutes a day for notebook writing and sharing. Don't forget to write with your students! The first two suggestions for quick-writes are meant to free students from the barriers that slow them down (a too-eager critic who censors every idea, concern over spelling, etc). The point here is to write fast and furious.

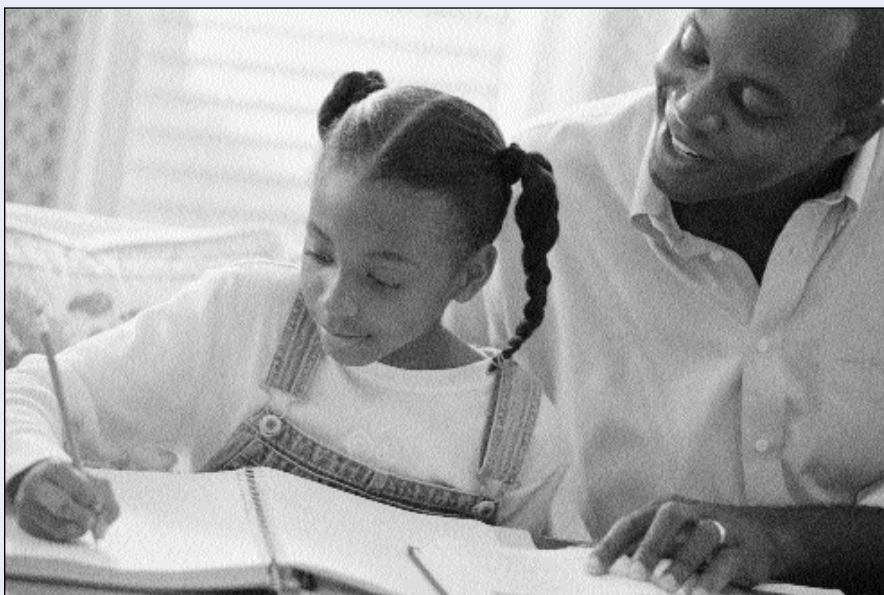
**Three by Three.** List three-word phrases for three minutes. Select a single word to designate a subject: *summer, beach, school*, etc. Get pencils ready—go! It doesn't matter if the three-word phrases make sense. If you think of two words, and get stuck, put anything onto the paper:

### Summer

hot dry sand  
wet cool water  
sticky sweaty smelly  
cool popsicles ointment

**Write about Your Name.** Write about your name in any way you choose: who you are named after, a name you were almost given, nicknames, how you feel about your name, etc.

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**Capture What Is Important.** Graham Salisbury offers this advice in *Speaking of Journals*: “Write...some little or big thing every day, and not stuff like ‘Today I went over to Jacky’s house and...’ No. That will be useless to you. Rather, write stuff like ‘Dad kissed me on the head today just before he left for work. He never kisses me like that, and I wonder what’s going on with him.’ Stuff like that—feelings, emotions. Good, meaty stuff.”

**Describe Your World.** A writer’s eye takes in the surroundings with keen perception. Learning to “see” means stretching to use all five senses. Stake a claim on something—your desk, the classroom, the lunchroom, your bedroom. Don’t just describe what you see, but also include the sounds, smells, and feel of the place.

**Include Drawings and Sketches.** Study something big (your backyard) or small (a daffodil just opening in spring). Make a drawing or sketch to capture the image. Then write in the empty space a description of what you see. Barbara Bash says, “I go out into an ecosystem and draw. By drawing it, I know it in a more intimate way. Even if it seems much too complicated to capture on the page, when I try to draw it I make an inner connection and understand it in a physical way.”

**Write to a Specific Audience.** Think of something you’ve been wanting to say to someone and write it in your notebook in letter form. Write as if you are speaking directly to that person. You might even create a conversation and let the person speak back to you.

**Bits and Pieces.** In *Speaking of Journals*, Jean Craighead George says, “It’s tough for kids to get started on journal keeping, so I suggest they bring back little things they pick up along the way—folders from a museum visit, a leaf, a dandelion—and paste them into a notebook. Then they can write their thoughts about them, what they saw and what they felt” (73).

Invite students to bring in photographs, ticket stubs, postcards, letters, one item from a collection, a lock of hair, or anything else that’s special to them.

## General Tips

Invite students to write, share, and write again. One of the best ways to stimulate notebook writing is for kids to listen to what others have written. Thirty minutes is enough time to try one of these invitations, listen to volunteers read, and return for another go-around with the same type of entry.

Each day that you explore a different use for the notebook, record it on a large chart for future reference. Students know that they can attempt any one of these ideas—or invent one of their own—whenever the time feels right. ▼

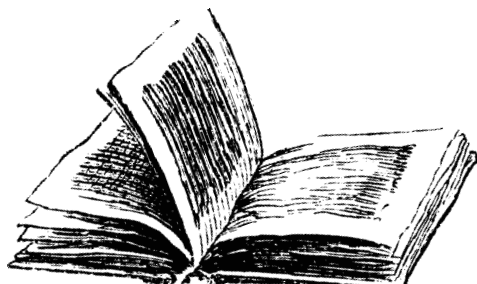
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## Conclusion

*by Joanne Hindley Salch, coeditor*

A writer’s notebook can be many things: a place to make mistakes, to experiment, to record overheard conversations or family stories, to remember an inspiring quotation, free associate, ask questions, or record beautiful or unusual language, to jot down the seeds of unborn stories or story beginnings, to tell the truth, or to lie. It’s also a place to record memories, embellish upon them, remember what you’ve been reading, and record stories you’ve heard about other people. It’s a place to remember one word that conjures up an image, to jot down things you’re surprised by, to observe, to record impressions, or to describe a picture or a person or an image that you can’t get out of your head.

A notebook is a receptacle, a tool, a way to hold on to things. Students should view notebooks as documents of their lives; they learn not only to honor what they see but to look in the first place. If students become more aware of the world around them and know there is a place for these observations, then this awareness will be more naturally included in their own writing. They will learn to think on the page, so their notions of what’s possible in writing become less limited. ▼



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**Next Issue:** The October issue of *School Talk* will focus on a new vision of balanced literacy learning.

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—Jerome C. Harste, NCTE Past President

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